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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 000471

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: SCATTERED REACTION TO KARZAI'S ELECTION DECREE

REF: A. KABUL 455

[1](#)B. KABUL 466

Classified By: Acting DCM Robert Clarke for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY. Afghanistan's political establishment reacted with a wide range of opinions following President Karzai's 2/28 decree instructing the International Election Commission (IEC) to set an election date in accordance with the Constitution (ref A). The vagueness of the decree's wording and the short notice with which it was announced may be responsible for the scattered feedback from many politicians, who in many cases have moved 180 degrees overnight vis-a-vis their public position on the 8/20 election date. Inaccurate media reporting that the decree explicitly called for an April election, and the IEC's decision to "study" the issue for up to 10 days before responding, may prolong the confusion and delay a focus on the real issue for the country's political leadership: reaching a political consensus on the interim government.

[1](#)2. (C) Despite issuing some statements to the media that suggested otherwise, all major political leaders privately understand the decree is a first step to legitimizing an election date after the 5/22 expiration of Karzai's term. The uncoordinated reaction by the president's chief rivals illustrates long-standing differences in the United Front coalition and Karzai's ability to exploit them. With the opposition in disarray, the 8/20 election date becomes more attractive for all involved. End Summary.

[1](#)3. (U) Paragraphs 4-9 summarize the initial reactions of Afghan political leaders and analysts to Karzai's decree.

Lower House

[1](#)4. (C) The Lower House did not discuss the decree in its 3/2 session and has issued no official statement. Speaker Qanooni (Kabul, Tajik) may have realized he overplayed his hand after adamantly insisting on "elections according to the Constitution." Deputy Speaker Yaseni (Nangarhar, Pashtun) said the decree effectively paused the larger debate over post-5/22 presidential continuity and the presidential campaign itself. He blamed the decree for forcing him to delay a public announcement of his candidacy. MP Dawood Sultanzoi (Ghazni, Pashtun) said he agreed with the president's rationale, but since Karzai did not consult Parliament before issuing the decree, he and other MPs believed any action by Karzai would be illegal. MP Shukria Barakzai (Kabul, Pashtun) claimed credit for convincing Karzai to keep the decree's wording vague and to leave out a specific call for an April election.

Upper House

[1](#)5. (C) The Upper House passed a resolution on 3/1 (ref B) supporting the August date and calling for Mojaddedi to lead the interim government. Deputy Speaker Hamed Gailani said most MPs were more worried about Karzai staying on as a

caretaker president while campaigning for re-election than they were supportive of Mojaddedi's desire to repeat his role as an interim leader. MPs were visibly upset by the decree's implication of an earlier election date, given that the Upper House had earlier gone on record backing the IEC's reasoning for an August date out of loyalty to Karzai. Only five MPs voted against the resolution.

United Front

¶6. (C) United Front members were largely caught off guard by the decree, exposing fissures in the opposition coalition Karzai has tried to exploit for months. UF spokesman Sancharaki and Hazara leader Mohaqqueq protested any move to call early elections as limiting access to polls for residents of mountainous provinces. UF leader Rabbani tried to retract Sancharaki's public comments, hoping for a more reasoned reaction that did not play into Karzai's strategy to force the opposition to admit an August election was the best "legal" date. Marshall Fahim told us privately before the announcement that he believed Karzai had found a path out of the crisis that would protect the 8/20 election date and leave him at the top of the government during the interim period. Qanooni and 1st Vice President Massoud were quiet, reluctant to further play into Karzai's hands, and unable to resolve the inconsistencies in their positions.

Other Politicians

¶7. (C) Afghan Millat party members were among those to, at

KABUL 00000471 002 OF 002

least on the surface, denounce Karzai for "calling a snap election." One Afghan Millat MP claimed Karzai intended the decree to foil party leader Ahadi's recently announced presidential campaign. Presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani reacted quickly to emphasize his support for the 8/20 date in the media, but kept a moderate tone, signaling he knew how Karzai intended events to play out. Some political analysts believed Karzai supporter MP Abdul Rassoul Sayyaf (Kabul, Pashtun) played a major role in shaping the decree. His participation in recent meetings with jihadi leaders may have been a ploy to size up the opposition's weaknesses for Karzai to exploit.

Security Players and Civil Society

¶8. (SBU) Senior and working-level representatives of the police and army used two regularly scheduled election security meetings to reaffirm their preference for an 8/20 date. Afghan Army Chief of Operations LTG Karimi spoke at length on 2/28, and Police Colonel Alimas and Army Colonel Mo'men repeated this theme on 3/2. ISAF's election security planning liaison seconded the view that 8/20 allows for better election security planning, force increases, and positive changes to the security environment for voters. These statements would allow the IEC to reassert its argument that weather, logistics and security mean a universal franchise is possible in August, but not in the spring.

¶9. (SBU) Free and Fair Election Foundation of Afghanistan (FEFA), the Afghan coalition of NGOs leading voter registration and election observation, on 3/2 issued a press release in favor of the August date. FEFA acknowledge the contradictions in the Constitution and rejected any role for the president in setting the election date. It then argued for "transparent, free, and fair elections" in August.

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